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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have questioned the decision making influence of both elected and appointed school boards. More research into the decision making functions of boards was needed, and one opportunity to do further research was presented in an upstate school district in New York. A moderately sized city with a K-12 school population of 3,200 changed from an appointed school board to an elected school board. To establish if the former appointed school board had made decisions in a manner different from that of the current elected school board, content analysis of school board minutes was used. Five broad areas of school functioning were used to classify the demands recorded in the school board minutes. A 6-month period in 1968-1969 under the appointed board was compared to the identical six month period in 1970-1971 under the elected board. With several exceptions, the school district under the appointed board seemed to be the mirror image of the district under the elected board. (Author/JF)

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A COMPARISON STUDY OF

THE ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD IN NEW YORK STATE

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In recent times, schools districts have come under intensive study as political systems. As defined by Easton, a political system processes the demands of its component systems.[1] Among these, all quite well known, are the administrators, the school board, the teachers, the clerical maintenance staff, the students, and the community at large. Not to be excluded are the federal and state educational organizations to which school districts are responsible and also the other neighboring school districts that complete the environment in which school districts exist.

Facts about the School Board

It is an established fact that ninety percent of all school boards within these school organizations are elected rather than appointed to their positions.[2] Because of a societal commitment to the democratic process and an educational philosophy also committed to local control of schools, school board members and educational administrators alike have accepted on faith the proposition that elected school boards are more responsive to local community needs. However, this assumption has been seriously challenged.

Studies which impugn the concept that elected boards and local control are beneficial to school systems emanated from the University of Chicago and Stanford University. When Campbell was at the Midwest Administrative Center at Chicago, he criticized local control of schools by theoretically showing that it was nonexistent.[3] In a legal sense, schools are the vehicle of the state, and as such, their operations were for state rather than local purposes. Later, James then at Stanford, substantiated this contention by showing that large school district school boards did not budget their monies any differently whether they were appointed or elected.[4] In at least one aspect of school district operation then, it did not appear to matter whether school boards were elected or appointed. Each board continued to spend school funds in a similar way.

Comparison of Elected and Appointed School Board

The decision making influence of the elected school board has been similarly questioned in the area of federal aid. Two studies, one from Stanford and the other from Berkeley found that it was the superintendent, not the elected school board, who influenced the decision to apply for federal aid.[5,6] This decision, it seems, was left in the hands of the administrative specialists. Most recently, the finding was supported in a national study of thirty school districts varying in size from 750 to 500,000 students.[7] It was the skills of the administrators, not the elected or appointed school board, which seemed all important for obtaining federal aid.

There have been speculations that both elected and appointed school boards may have become appendages of a bygone era in public education. Still more research into the decision-making functions was badly needed, and one opportunity to do further research was presented in an upstate school district in New York. A moderately sized city with a K-12 school population of 3,200 students faced several unique school problems. One major influence on the school was the presence of a major Air Force base. Approximately 20 percent of the students in this district came from families connected with the military. In addition, another potent force acting on the district was a relatively large and growing unit of the State University system. These forces, along with a growing recreation industry, a stable trade in agriculture and dairying, and a small but broadening base of industry and business, acted on the educational system of the city.[8]

Methods of Research

In 1970, the Common Council of the city requested that the school board move to independent status where it would be popularly elected instead of appointed.[9] To establish if the former appointed school board made decisions

differently from the elected school board, content analysis of school board minutes was used. Five broad areas of school functioning were used to classify the demands recorded in the school board minutes. These were school finance, curriculum, personnel, facilities, and issues of general concern. These five areas were, in turn, systematically analyzed and categorized into 23 areas covering all aspects of school organization. A six month period in 1968-1969 under the appointed board was compared to the identical six month period in 1970-1971 under the elected board.

Significance of two proportions from independent samples was used to analyze the minutes. The assumptions of a distribution free test, population unknown, and less than an ordinal scaling technique, justified the use of this statistic. It produced a Z-ratio where significance was identified at the .05 level.

With several exceptions, the school district under the appointed board seemed to be the mirror image under the elected board. Support for this conclusion comes from examining the significant differences in demand processing found in Table 1.

TABLE 1

POLITICAL DEMANDS OF THE SAMPLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

UNDER APPOINTED AND ELECTED SCHOOL BOARDS 1968-1971[a]

Demand Area	Appointed Board 1968-1969	Elected Board 1970-1971	Z-Score
School Finance			
School Budget	15	19	-1.79
School Taxes	5	3	1.03
Federal Aid	4	2	4.21**
State Aid	2	2	--
Total	26	26	1.26
Curriculum			
Present Teaching Methods	4	4	-.85
New Teaching Methods	--	3	-3.17**
Curriculum Additions	5	1	2.91*
Athletics	1	1	- .33
Total	10	9	.50
Personnel			
Teacher Behavior	20	28	1.00
Student Behavior	7	17	-8.00**
School Board Behavior	12	22	-1.00
Administrative Behavior	4	3	1.66
Clerical-Maintenance	9	6	2.05*
Total	52	76	-.91
Facilities			
School Facility Adequacy	15	22	-.33
General			
Community Services	--	6	-2.18*
All Demands	103	139	--

[a]A six month period for each school year was sampled.

*Significant at the .05 level.

**Significant at the .001 level.

There were functional differences in six areas under the appointed and elected school boards. In federal aid, curriculum additions, and clerical-maintenance demands, the appointed school board processed significantly more demands proportionally than did the elected board. However, these significant differences did not point to the superiority of the appointed board because the elected board also processed significantly more demands proportionally than did the appointed board in the areas of new teaching methods, student behavior, and community services.

Demands on the Elected Board

In the areas of new teaching methods, student behavior demand and community service demands, the elected board outperformed the appointed board. While the appointed board processed no demands for new teaching methods, the elected board treated three demands. Two of these were reported on new teaching methods presented by teachers, and the third concerned a proposal to have teachers devote more time to developing new methods.

The elected board also processed more demands for students than did the appointed board. Seventeen students demands were treated by the elected board, while only three were handled by the appointed board. Not only were these demands treated by the elected board more numerous, they were also of a wider variety including requests by parents to bus every child in the district. Other demands handled by the elected board included several for nonresident tuition, school scheduling changes, a report on summer school, and routine information about student health insurance. In contrast, the appointed board handled student demands on transporting individual children, a presentation of a yearbook, and the selection of a commencement speaker.

Where the demands concerned the clerical and maintenance personnel, the appointed board treated significantly more demands, but the demands were not

over a broad range of concerns for the clerks and maintenance staff of the district. Instead most of these were over salary schedules, appointments, resignations, and leave requests. These same types of demands were also treated by the elected board except there were fewer of them.

Demands on the Appointed Board

In most areas, the appointed school board performed similarly to the elected board except in the demand areas of federal aid, curriculum additions, and clerical maintenance personnel demands. Table 1 shows that the appointed board processed significantly more demands proportionally than the elected board. Content analysis also showed that federal aid demands under the appointed board were much less routine. They included approval of an NDEA proposal, the appointment of a director of a federal Follow-Through program, a report on the federal school lunch program, and a demand to establish district goals for federal aid. In contrast, the elected board processed only two routine federal aid demands dealing with identifying the superintendent as the legal agent of the school district.

A similar finding was revealed in curriculum additions. Under the appointed board, curriculum additions were not only proportionally more frequent, but they were more broad. New textbooks were introduced, a report on a federal program was presented, and a request for greater teacher participation in curriculum was presented. The appointed school board also granted approval for a new driver education program and a new art program at the secondary level. In contrast, the elected school board processed only three demands for new textbooks. It appeared that the appointed board far out performed the elected board in curriculum additions. However, not quite the same can be said for clerical-maintenance personnel demands.

Where these demands were concerned, it appeared that the appointed board proportionally treated more demands concerned with the clerks, secretaries, and other maintenance personnel in the school district. However, the demands serviced were more related to salary schedules, resignations, and leave requests among the non-certificated personnel. These same types of clerical-maintenance personnel demands were processed by the elected school board, the distinction was that there were significantly fewer of them in proportion to the total personnel demands. This was accounted for by a change in the processing of personnel demands during negotiations where the personnel demands became part of the negotiation process. After 1969, more of the personnel demands were shifted to the negotiations sessions between the administration and non-certified negotiations unit. They were no longer subject to a full hearing by the school board, but were processed in closed negotiation sessions. This is a good example of how state laws in negotiations changed the structure of demand processing away from full community view to private talks, and this should be the subject of a future study.

Boards are Equal

While there were distinct differences in demand processing by the elected and appointed school boards in the sample school district, these differences appear to cancel each other out. The elected board processed significantly more demands proportionally in three areas and so did the appointed school board. Consequently, the results of this study were in agreement with other studies of school board structures. Fundamentally, there appeared to be few differences in the political demand processing in the two types of organizational structures.

Although a conclusion such as this based on a study of one school district may seem somewhat anomalous and limited, it cannot be dismissed. Any brief

scanning of the history of other behavior sciences shows many instances of crucially important research where the observations were confined to the actions of one subject.[10] The same might be said of studies of school organizations. The educator who cannot see the generalization from single sample studies, is as narrow as the researcher who cannot appreciate the fact that some studies should never be undertaken without a large number of subjects.

Regardless of the rationale and despite the obvious limitations of this study, it seems fairly well established that the elected board and the appointed school boards perform equally well. There is no longer any need to condemn the appointed school board for being non-responsive. On the contrary, there seems to be an ever greater need to study the performance of the elected school board because it seems to be no better at demand processing than the appointed board.

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9. Independence, in this instance, is a form of school governance which refers to the change from an appointed to an elected school board. Although independence is commonly thought to involve only school taxing and budgeting powers, its definition used here is one of 32 forms of school board independence derived in studies of school organization. See reference in footnote number 4.

10. Dukes, William F. "N=1" in W. Leslie Barnette, Jr. (ed.) Readings in Psychological Tests and Measurements," Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1968, pp. 59-64.